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ABSTRACT

As a teacher of English, comparative literature, and foreign languages, the author views the state of the art of foreign language instruction and suggests reforms. Discussion focuses on foreign language requirements, premises on which language study is based, tests and literature, misplaced priorities of college language departments, relevance of curriculum, institutional change, humanism and five specific recommendations. The title of this article refers to the 13th century shift in the study of the humanities to pragmatic commercial studies, a striking similarity to present educational trends, and is viewed as a betrayal of the humanists. (RL)

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THE TREASON OF THE CLERKS:

— Dr. Alain Renoir

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I suppose that a speaker who would make himself understood ought to address his audience from a clearly defined point of view. The simple truth is that I suffer from an acute and lasting attack of academic split personality: on the one hand, I hold a fundamental belief that nobody should be allowed to vote until he has pursued far and deep the study of at least one ancient and one modern foreign language; on the other hand, long and increasingly demoralizing experience with students who have satisfied the so-called college requirement in a foreign language has led me to wonder whether the cause of civilization might not be served by not merely abolishing all foreign-language requirements but indeed subtracting, rather than adding, academic credit from the records of those youngsters who have been permitted to wander into the classroom of the foreign-language teacher. Then, I draw my salary half-and-half from two very different sources: on the one hand, I am a teacher of Comparative Literature, and most of the courses which I offer in this field have a prerequisite of senior or graduate-level courses in at least two foreign languages, so that the elimination of foreign languages would presumably have a negative effect upon my style of living; on the other hand, I am a teacher of English, and a majority of courses in foreign languages are in competition with my own, so that the elimination of foreign languages would presumably have a positive effect upon my style of living. Because I wish to address myself to the increasingly precarious position of foreign languages and to consider within a necessarily brief compass some obvious causes as well as some possible remedies, I shall wish to speak from the various points of view of my fractured personality.

FL Requirements Diminish

That foreign languages may be in a precarious position is, I think, a generally recognized fact. A survey of the academic scene will reveal that numerous American universities and colleges have recently dropped whatever requirements they used to have in foreign languages; that doctoral programs in English, the social sciences, and the sciences are likewise dropping requirements in foreign languages at an alarming rate; and that many of the institutions which still preserve a vestigial requirement are facing demands by the students, and not seldom by substantial portions of the faculty as well, for elimination of the requirement in question.

Since modern democracy makes it a virtue in its leaders to follow the wishes of the masses without asking questions, the most elementary sense of fair play compels me to acknowledge before you that numerous departments of foreign languages have risen to the challenge and fearlessly responded to popular demand by modernizing their own degree requirements in ways that boldly eliminate entire areas of linguistic and literature study. A glance at university catalogues over the past twenty years will show that many a doctoral program in Romance Languages has done away with a previously enforced Latin requirement before splintering into separate doctoral programs in French or in Italian or in Spanish alone. The veritable linguistic hecatomb which has thus taken place where it might least have been expected has been given pious and scholarly justification: a scholar in the making who intends to devote his entire life to the investigation of morphemic pauses in the minor poems of Minou Drouet has clearly no need for Latin, so that exposing him to the language of Terence, Vergil, Ovid, Horace, and Cicero would in fact constitute an irrational — not to say frankly anti-intellectual — attempt at slowing down the progress of literary research; by the same token, a teacher who intends to make his mark on the culture of the United States by introducing generation after generation of students to the various levels of meaning in the gaucho novel of Argentina can hardly be expected to find need for the language of Dante or that of Molière.

The argument on the basis of need is formidable; and I have heard it advanced so often by respected colleagues at the high school, college, and university that I hesitate to lay myself open to the charge of *hybris* (or what the media-evalists among you will call *desmesure* or *unmâze*) by a frontal attack upon it. I shall surely be permitted to mention, however, that it somehow never fails to bring to my mind the passage in Shakespeare's *King Lear* where the old King's retinue of a hundred knights is reduced to naught by his daughters Goneril and Regan:

> Goneril: Hear me, my Lord.
> What need you five-and-twenty? ten? or five?
> Regan: What need one?
> Lear: O reason not the need! Our basest beggars
> Are in the poorest things superfluous.
> (Pelican AB 14, II, iv, 255-60)

In view of the observable facts which I have mentioned above, an innocent observer might conceivably get the idea that teachers of foreign languages find their usbject as superfluous as the rest of the nation obviously does, with the exception, of course, of the one foreign language which they happen to teach. And even this last statement may not be allowed to pass without qualification, for the fact that some of the most distinguished departments of Germanic Languages grant the Ph.D. to students who have never studied either Gothic or Old High German may go far to convince our innocent observer that not all university teachers of German are totally free of contempt for the German language and its tradition.

FL Teachers Must Justify Their Discipline

Although I consider myself decidedly less innocent than our hypothetical observer, I have great difficulty escaping the conclusion that teachers of foreign languages have somehow failed to justify their discipline to their colleagues and students. This conclusion, incidentally, must not be construed as a stricture, for I see little intrinsic virtue in attempting to turn out a product which will meet with the immediate approval of our colleagues in Engineering, Psychology, or Statistics, and their students. It must, however, be construed as an attempt to point out a tactical failure in the realm of academic politics, for the academy is so constructed that the Engineer, the Psychologist, the Statistician, and the other dispensers of non-literacy happen to control the overwhelming majority of the votes, and we may not expect them to give foreign languages the vote of confidence which teachers of foreign languages themselves have demonstrably failed to give languages other than the one that yields their bread and butter. What I am trying to say in my clumsy way is that we must advertise our wares if we expect to sell them but that, especially in educational matters, the best advertisement is not always that which most immediately appeals to

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A PARABLE FOR 1970*

University of California, Berkeley

prospective customers before they have tasted the product, and that there is some danger in trying to make the product itself conform to the promises of ill-advised advertisement. A wine dealer might not get very far if he tried to sell a bottle of Nuits Saint Georges to a connoisseur by using advertisement techniques aimed at a man who had never tasted anything but sarsaparilla. Furthermore, if our dealer were to make his Nuits Saint Georges taste like sarsparilla to live up to the advertisement, the chances are that the customers would soon wake up to the fact that sarsparilla is cheaper than Nuits Saint Georges and return with all dispatch to their original drinking habits while leaving the dealer stuck with his product. I believe that the future of foreign languages have been endangered by unwise advertisement which may have affected the quality of the product in certain areas.

We Must Re-Examine The Premises Of FL Study: Usefulness?

The fundamental error, I submit, has been the emphasis on the utilitarian aspects of foreign languages. These are at best transitory, usually negligible, occasionally imaginary, and in any case likely to draw attention away from more important aspects of language study. As a child, for instance, I was told that I must learn Latin because it was indispensable to the study of medicine; but I did not want to be a doctor, and the voice of common sense told me that there surely had been, were, and would be doctors who did not know Latin, hence the obvious superfluousness of the language. Even today, one can still hear the voice of the high school teacher of Latin, and occasionally that of the Professor of Classics, attempting to maintain that the study of Latin will help people with their English: an assertion which, in view of dogma promulgated by the new linguistics that English has nothing to do with Latin and can best be helped by more English, merely reenforces the general conviction that Latinists are as pathetically out of touch with reality as they are superfluous. Until very recent years, teachers of German were very fond of claiming the value of their language for prospective graduate students in English, who would have to study forms of early English somewhat reminiscent of the German language. Alas, doctoral programs in English are rapidly giving up the earlier periods as irrelevant, and even those students who wander into mediaeval courses will find that German may hinder as well as foster their progress. One recalls the case of the student who came to *The General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales* with two years of German behind him and was required to translate the description of the Prioress; he eventually came to the line, "Ful semely after hir mete she raughte" (Chaucer, *Works,* Boston 1957, 1-136, "Very daintily she reached for her food") and put his German to work to produce the following translation: "rollingly after her meat she smoked." The vision of the lovely prioress biting the end of a big black cigar and blowing rings of smoke between her sensual lips is unquestionably interesting, but I am by no means certain that it justifies encouraging the study of German for prospective students of early English. Nor may the study of German or French or any foreign language, for that matter, be defended before students of English as an access road to scholarly works in other languages, for the monthly publication *Abstracts of English Studies* has proved a far better access road than any language; and then, there is little use hiding the fact that the bulk of English scholarship is written and published in the English language by American assistant professors striving for promotion to tenure rank.

To Promote Understanding Among Nations?

In recent years, we have been told that the study of foreign languages would promote understanding among nations: but then, history does not exactly suggest that people who understand each other's languages get along better than those who do not; and, even if they did, I know few people equipped with the intelligence, energy, and time needed to learn all the languages necessary to communicate with all the other people with whom they are supposed to get along, so that the enterprise is doomed to failure from the start. We are likewise told that the study of modern foreign languages will enable us to carry on conversations with the natives of the countries we visit and thus gain an understanding of their culture. Even if the premise be granted, however, it does not lead to an argument in favor of the study of foreign languages: in the first place, almost anyone who has studied a language without making it his profession knows that the ability to speak and understand the spoken word is likely to vanish rapidly if permitted to remain dormant, so that the student who completes two college years in a given language and visits two or three years later the country where the language is spoken will almost certainly discover that he can neither understand the natives nor make himself understood by them, and he will legitimately conclude that he got little or no return for the time, effort, and money which he invested in the study of the language; in the second place, those of us who have found themselves suddenly plunged into the life of a foreign country whose language we had not previously studied know that one learns much more of a language within a few months of such intensive exposure than in two years at college, and the process is infinitely less costly financially. I have calculated that an out-of-state student at the University of California at Berkeley spends about $1,266.66 to secure the instruction necessary to satisfy the current graduation requirement in a foreign language, while three months in Europe would cost him as little as $750.00 with the help of a charter flight and would yield at the very least an equivalent ability to speak and understand the language. Speaking for the half of me that is a professor of English, the foregoing facts and figures make it impossible to vote in good conscience for a requirement designed to send my students to the foreign-language classroom until they have learned how to read and speak a language other than English.

To Pass The ETS Tests Or Study The Literature?

I have thus far addressed myself almost exclusively to the practical aspect of modern foreign languages because it is the aspect which has been emphasized in the schools and colleges since the Second World War. I do not believe, for example, that the ETS proficiency test in Spanish, German, or French tells us anything about the student's understanding of Cervantes or Goethe or Molière, but we know that it is used by a great many colleges and graduate schools to determine whether the foreign-language requirement has been satisfied or not. I have been looking at two textbooks widely used in first-year language courses: both are superbly calibrated tools to turn out pupils capable of making themselves understood orally and of reading the newspapers; but I am

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at a loss to find anything worth remembering in one, and only the most energetic attempt at practicing cultural democracy may possibly lead me to say that the other contains four pages worth reading out of a total of nearly 700. So that I may not be accused of sheer perversity in selecting unrepresentative texts, I must add that one of them is a project of the MLA and represents the work of not fewer than twenty-seven professors at nearly as many colleges and universities.

It would be both stupid and unfair for an outsider to assume that teachers of foreign languages see the ultimate goal of their discipline in the successful completion of a first-year language course at college or in a satisfactory score on the ETS examination. Rather, they presumably hope that the skills which are thus imparted and tested will eventually enable and lead the student to examine the literature and culture of the country whose language he has learned, and to do so in an intelligently informed and efficient manner. This were a consummation devoutly to be wished, but the results have thus far not justified the hope.

Advanced High School Courses Do Not Teach Literature

In the first place, the lamentable truth is that innumerable students never proceed beyond the ETS examination level or its equivalent, so that they complete their education with full awareness that their language training was a waste of time and effort; and those who eventually enter the teaching profession seem to do so with determination to seize the first opportunity of voting down a requirement which brought them nothing but worthless drudgery. In the second place, the realization that successful completion of the college requirement in a foreign language depends upon linguistic skills rather than cultural experience has encouraged the high schools to emphasize the former at the expense of the latter: I occasionally teach a freshman course which has a prerequisite of a grade of *A* in the fourth high-school year of a foreign language, and I have been repeatedly delighted by the speaking fluency of my students as well as appalled by their total inability to read with any sort of intelligence the simplest poem in the language they speak so well. In the third place, the demand thus created for high-school teachers of language has encouraged the colleges to implement degree programs which develop the so-called language skills at the expense of the literary tradition.

Colleges Have Misplaced Priorities

The state of affairs which I have in mind is conveniently illustrated by the Department of French at one of our leading universities. The first thing which a glance at the catalogue will reveal is that a course in phonetics is prerequisite to all upper-division courses, thus advertising the apparent belief that the pronunciation of the language is more important than the serious study of literature. Nor can one argue that such practice in pronunciation as is imparted in the course in question is essential to the interpretation of literature, for no-one has yet demonstrated that the interpretation of such masterpieces of the French tradition as *Gormont et Isembart* or the *Grand Testament* or even the *Vie Inestimable du Grand Gargantua* will be anything but confused by the attempt to apply to these texts the rules of current phonetics. The second thing is that, on the upper-division level, the twelve-course degree program lists only four courses as specifically required, and these are in various aspects of advanced grammar and composition, thus advertising the apparent belief that the ability to write the language is worth one-third of a degree program and deserves priority as a requirement over any single author in the language. The third thing is that, with the exception of the appropriate portions of the one-year survey course, the degree requirements include absolutely nothing prior to the second half of the eighteenth century, thus advertising the apparent belief that the poems of Jacques Prevert ought to be treated on equal footing with the *Chanson de Roland,* the romances of Chrestien de Troyes, and the tragedies of Corneille. The fourth thing is that no work whatsoever is required in classical antiquity, thus advertising the apparent belief that the same poems of Prevert which are of equal importance with those of Chrestien are of decidedly greater importance than the works of Homer, Aeschylus, Plato, Vergil, Cicero, Ovid, Catullus, and the rest of classical antiquity.

I bow to no-one in my admiration for the products of this sort of program, especially since the vast majority of them consists of bright-eyed and extremely concupiscible young ladies who speak French almost as well as any Parisian child, whose minds have never been violated by intense and prolonged intercourse with Horace or Petronius or Apuleius or Eustache Deschamps or Clement Marot or even Agrippa d'Aubigné, but are generously filled with the wisdom of the Theater of the Absurd and the lead article in the latest issue of *L'Illustration,* and whose principal function is to beautify the streets of America until they marry the manager of the Ford agency in their home town and mature into leaders of the local women's club — but I seriously question whether they should be allowed to vote. In fact they often put me in mind of Matthew Arnold's reaction to the suggestion that one might conceivably substitute modern languages for Greek as part of a formal education, thus giving up Aristotle in order to prepare students "to fight the battle of life with the waiters in foreign hotels" (*Culture and Anarchy,* in *Portable Matthew Arnold,* Viking Press, p. 515).

Are FL Needs Only For The Contemporary?

The distressing aspect of my account is by no means the array of blatant cultural betrayals which I have listed here, but rather the fact that a comparative examination of a representative sampling of college catalogues suggests that the program in question ranks among the very best in modern foreign languages and in English as well. It illustrates our vigorous faith in the value of technical proficiency at the service of the "here and now" (to borrow a phrase from Aldous Huxley's *Island*), as well as our equally vigorous contempt for that tradition without which, as Goethe assures us, man is doomed to live like an animal "von Tag zu Tage" (*Westöstlicher Divan,* Tübingen 1965, "Buch des Unmuths" V, 13, p. 97).

From a strictly practical point of view, this faith in the here-and-now has done wonders in supporting Engineering, the Social Sciences, City Planning, Speech, and (I am ashamed to admit it) the Department of English whenever it has chosen to prostitute itself by downgrading Vergil, *Beowulf,* Chaucer, and Shakespeare in favor of current American Literature; but, in respect to Foreign Languages, it is quite simply an oxymoron, since the very term *foreign* negates by definition the concept of *here.* I submit that this oxymoron partly explains the precarious situation of foreign languages today. In a pathetic attempt to become an active part of the here-and-now for which industry, business, science, and now the students themselves are clamoring, foreign languages have devoted years of relentless effort to accomplishing what they can at best do half-way but which competing disciplines are increasingly doing all the way and very well without any special effort. If I were an inquiring undergraduate in search of the here-and-now, I seriously doubt that I should turn to modern foreign languages for the answer to my queries. I should instead elect a joint major in Sociology, Psychology, Modern Philosophy, and current American Literature; and if I had been convinced by the argument which one of our most distinguished scholars

recently advanced in favor of foreign languages — to wit, that the experience of thinking in a medium other than one's native language is an essential part of education insofar as it frees us from the parochial notion that "there is only one way . . . of formulating concepts" (*The Foreign Language Requirements,* American Association of Teachers of German, 1969, p. 31) — I should then take a few courses in Mathematics because mathematicians assure me that their subject provides a means of formulating concepts far more different from English than any other language and infinitely more subtle in the bargain. We might as well face the fact that, if the worth of foreign languages is to be determined in terms of the demands of the here-and-now, it will necessarily be rated as low as it is in terms of their practical contribution to other disciplines. In this respect, we recall only too well an anecdote about Winston Churchill, who was supposed to have exclaimed about a man reportedly fluent in nine different languages, "What an admirable head-waiter he would make!" We find a similar contempt for foreign languages in John Milton's essay *On Education;* but the difference is that Milton specifically qualifies his contempt and that his own ideal educational program consisted almost exclusively of materials in the ancient and modern foreign languages: "Language is but the Instrument conveying to us things useful to be known. And though a linguist should pride himself to have all the Tongues that *Babel* left the world into, yet, if he have not studied the solid things in them as well as the Words and Lexicons, he were nothing so much to be esteem'd a learned man, as any yeoman or Tradesman competently wise in his mother dialect only" (*Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Milton,* Modern Library 132, p. 665). The "solid things," we infer from the remainder of the essay, should consist of key works by Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Cicero, Vergil, Castelvetro, Tasso, and other similar monuments perused in their original tongues.

I have quoted Milton because his statement explains better than I could why the current eagerness to answer the demands of the here-and-now has lost foreign languages the sympathy of a majority of humanistically-minded teachers who might otherwise have been their defenders in the schools, colleges, and universities. Speaking once again from the exclusive point of view of the teacher of English, I might conceivably be prompted by my humanistic conscience to tolerate the competition of Plato, Vergil, and Tasso, but there is no earthly reason why I should relinquish the smallest sliver of the academic pie to enable native Italians to secure teaching assistanships at my institution in order to prepare my potential customers to read the lead article in *L'Osservatore Romano* with an accent approaching that *lingua toscana in bocca romana* which is supposedly the mark of radio and television announcers. In other words, **I believe that one of the principal reasons why foreign languages may conceivably be on their way out is that, in order to appeal to the practical and the here-and-now, they have betrayed the humanistic tradition which could presumably have insured them the support of the friends of the Humanities; and their attempt to make introductory courses attractive to non-humanists has created generations of teachers in other fields who are now voting against a language requirement which has more often than not proved worthless to them both practically and educationally.** Since I am rather attracted by the notion of leaving this room without being stoned to death, I ought to express here my conviction that the betrayal in question has not been a conscious and premeditated affair on the part of the teachers: surely, nine out of ten teachers of foreign languages would rather see their former pupils devote their leisure hours to meditation over key passages of the Επτα επι Θηβας, the *De Senectute,* and *La Vida Es Un Sueño* than to polish up their Spanish pronunciation in order to increase their earnings by importing marijuana from Mexico. Yet the most honorable intentions in the world to not detract from the fact that a betrayal has taken place and that the fate of foreign languages in the United States will probably be affected by that betrayal.

The concept of betrayal almost automatically leads to an analogy which may in turn suggest a solution to the problem which is facing foreign languages. I am referring to the practices which developed at the University of Paris in the thirteenth and later centuries and which became best known to subsequent ages as the Treason of the Clerks. In a brilliant essay on the history and current state of the modern Humanities, Professor Harry Levin has recently reminded us that Henri d'Andeli's *Battle of the Seven Arts* paints a picture in which "under the influence of the *dictamen* the University of Paris has virtually become a business school . . . the old *auctores* are routed by the contemporary utilitarians" ("The Modern Humanities in Historical Perspective," *Publications of the Modern Humanities Research Association,* I, 4). The facts of the Treason of the Clerks resemble the current situation at the universities of Western Europe, England, and the United States in more ways than one: in addition to the curricular shift from the Humanities to the practical and contemporary, the professors had lost the respect of their sponsors, and the students were vociferously protesting just about everything. It was only with the sixteenth century that an enlightened king gave up the university as a lost cause and set things partially right by founding the Royal College primarily for the study of classical Greek, classical Hebrew, and classical Latin. In the intervening time, however, the term *clerk* in France had practically ceased to refer to learned men and had become an equivalent of *secretary*: in other words, the clerks and the Sorbonne had reaped the logical reward of their commitment to the practical and the here-and-now, and I seem to recall that they had to wait until the seventeenth century and the not-so-gentle hand of Cardinal Richelieu to see the dawn of academic reform.

Beyond as well as within the walls of the universities in France and the neighboring countries, the conclusion of the period at which we have just glanced — that is to say, the time immediately preceding what we call the Renaissance — was strikingly similar to our own time. It was the end of the rule of chivalry and the beginning of the rule of mercantilism, just as our own time has marked the end of the hegemony of middle-class values and the beginning of something which has yet to be defined. It was a time of continuous, demoralizing, and senseless national and international struggle during which Alain Chartier's *Ballade des Quatres Dames* seemed, to say the least, a sadly inadequate response to the humiliation of Agincourt, and his *Quadrilogue Invectif* a cry of despair rather than a solution, just as our current artistic efforts seem sadly inadequate responses to the repeated humiliations of our mighty armies at the hands of technologically inferior people, and the bulk of our philosophy wallows in our human bankruptcy rather that pointing the way out of it. It was a time of student rioting and academic debacle, just as our own too clearly is. It was a time when the practical and the philosophical, as well as the traditional and the here-and-now, would occasionally mix in bewildering combinations: whereas in Paris Jehan Gerson himself — the Very Christian Doctor of the Council of Constance — would devote much time and energy to doing battle against Christine de Pisan on the subject of the second half of the *Romance of the Rose,* across the Channel Duke Humphrey of Gloucester — brother of the King and master politician of England — would accumulate a library of classical texts and commission translations from Plato's *Republic* and Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium et Feminarum;* and, while the Doctors of the Sorbonne were

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busily turning out administrative assistants for the great of this world, across the Alps Humanim was being born in Italy, just as we see American professors of Philosophy pride themselves in their ignorance of and contempt for anything before the twentieth century, while a harassed David Ben Gurion somehow manages to make time to learn the language of Plato. But if one can thus find significant similarities between the fifteenth century and the twentieth, one can likewise find an equally significant difference between the twentieth century and the sixteenth: unlike the latter, the former has no Francis I to endow a Royal College for the Humanities. In other words, the story of the Treason of the Clerks and the founding of the Royal College provides us with a parable and a paradigm for reform, but it does not provide us with a powerful patron eager to direct and subsidize that reform. If we think that reform is indeed needed, I fear that we shall have to take matters into our own hands.

Because I believe that there is some truth in the Calvinist notion that the unfathomable depth of human depravity prevents the individual man from chastizing himself but not from chastizing others or being chastized by them, I have thus far spoken from the point of view of a critical outsider — or, to return to my initial account of my own position, from the point of view of the teacher of English addressing teachers of foreign languages with whom he has nothing in common. With your permission, I shall now make an about-face and continue from the point of view of an insider — or, to return again to my initial account, from the point of view of a teacher of Comparative Literature whose bread and butter depend on foreign languages and who has occasionally taught beginning courses in Old French and Icelandic. From the new position I have just assumed, I am fully aware of three facts of life which must be reckoned with. The first is quite simply that the word *college* means today something very different from what it meant a century ago, even though the name and geographic location of the institution may have remained the same. The second is that my personal future is gravely threatened by the increasing elimination of the college requirement in foreign languages: not only will the new trend necessarily yield fewer sections of first-year foreign languages, hence fewer teaching assistantships, hence fewer graduate students, and hence (O, horror!) fewer customers from my own courses, but it will eventually encourage high-school counselors to send their young charges to Journalism, Social Studies, and Sex Education instead of foreign languages, with the necessary result that fewer entering college students will have the preparation desirable for a program in Comparative Literature which requires advanced work in several languages, and my style of living will sink to depths which my sensitivity prevents me from even considering ahead of time. The third is that the charges which I listed earlier against modern foreign languages are largely correct, though by no means entirely so.

The Nature Of The College Has Changed

The first fact affects us in ways which could probably be determined statistically but at which we can guess closely enough for our purpose. A hundred years ago, a college was usually a place where a select group of people taught and studied both the sciences and the humanistic tradition of the Western World. Until 1898, for example, admission to Harvard was contingent upon the completion of a fair amount of English, history, and mathematics, along with at least six years of Latin and of either French or German, and four years of classical Greek. All these subjects were continued at college, where the required sophomore English course was Anglo-Saxon and where all but the science majors had to pick up at least a fourth foreign language — usually Italian or Hebrew — before graduation. Students in need of professional training would follow their education with a few years in Engineering or Architecture or something of the sort at M.I.T. I do not believe that the selection of students and faculty was on the basis of ability or intelligence, but it was a selection nonetheless, and one can require a select group to do certain things which cannot be required of the population at large: the boys at Harvard studied their three or four ancient and modern languages, but the ditch-digger, the grocer, the sailor, and the farmer had little time to indulge in such amenities of humanistic culture. Today, however, about sixty-percent of all Americans attend some sort of college, and the subjects offered for specialization range from Home Economics to Journalism and from Animal Husbandry to Nuclear Physics: college is everything to everyone, and technology has made it necessary to spend at least four years there to study the trades that our grandfathers learned from their own fathers. In other words, a college is now a place where people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two are assembled without regard for their training and interests. I do not think that this situation is necessarily bad or good, but I do think that it requires a more serious reconsideration of the nature of college requirements than we have hitherto been willing to undertake. In particular, we must realize that asking for a foreign-language requirement today is tantamount to saying that every blacksmith in the nineteenth century ought to have been required to pass the ETS examination before he may shoe his first horse; and what is currently happening to foreign-language requirements tells us that blacksmiths, whether they have learned their trade at home or at Cornell University, do not really think they need a foreign language. What we have achieved is regrettably clear: in a vain effort to force a little foreign language upon people who have no use for it and will have none of it, we have given up requiring much foreign language from those who should have it. I submit that we might have done better to permit the agricultural engineer to graduate without any foreign language but to require a serious amount of Latin and a modern foreign language from the historian, the philosopher, and the student of English literature.

Supply Must Be Worthy Of The Demand

The second fact makes both a negligible and a very strong claim to our consideration, depending on our point of view. On the one hand, my crass concern for my own material welfare, however understandable, is hardly a valid premise in an argument which concerns the education of an entire people; on the other hand, my material welfare may conceivably become immediately relevant to the argument in question if the skills which I represent should turn out to be a vital part of education. To put it differently, the worth of a teacher depends primarily on the worth of his subject matter; but, human nature being what it is, we know full well that each one of us would give himself a vote of confidence regardless of his subject matter. Yet, I do not think that our natural desire to retain teaching assistantships for our graduate students will prove an especially effective argument in trying to convince the engineer and the professor of English to vote in favor of the foreign-language requirement.

FL Teachers Must Lead The Reform

The third fact is of course the crucial one if foreign languages are to survive in this country, since continued failure to react intelligently to the charges against us would be construed as an admission that our subject matter is intrinsically worthless. An intelligent reaction, however, must not be confused with the indignant rejection of charges which

may be only too correct, or even with the frittering away of time and energy on peripheral issues which require individual handling of each separate case because they do not lend themselves to synthetic argumentation. Attempts to defend foreign languages on purely practical grounds usually fall within this category and are likely to draw devastating answers from the opposition. I have seen in print the argument that the language requirement should be maintained because of "the fact that with a four-semester proficiency the student, perhaps with some additional practice, will be able to pass the Graduate language examinations" in other disciplines (*F.L. Requirements,* p. 28). We need not stretch our wits very far to imagine the answer of the professors in the other disciplines: "Why, bully for you! . . . but we've just today abolished the graduate foreign-language requirement." When all is said, I think that we are faced with one of these very rare situations where honesty is indeed the best policy: we must give up trying to peddle our wares on bogus grounds, and we must take our cue from Milton and Goethe to sell foreign languages for the humanistic tradition which they contain.

Humanistic Tradition Justifies FL

My last statement necessarily gives rise to two questions: (1) cannot one gain acces to the humanistic tradition without the drudgery of learning foreign languages, and (2) do we need a tradition at all? The first question may be answered empirically with a glance at, for instance, the first word of the *Iliad:* a poem which opens with the Greek noun μηνος (μηιν in this particular case) is simply not the same thing as a poem which opens with the English verb *sing,* so that anyone who reads the latter while thinking that he is getting to the meaning of the former is clearly off to a bad start. The second question is harder to answer since those who have no tradition themselves are usually as impervious to its significance as our earlier hypothetical drinker of sarsparilla would be to the necessity of aging wine before drinking it. Since I believe that tradition is the main ingredient in making the difference between the man and the ape, I shall tell two stories that illustrate the significance of tradition.

The first story is one in which I was involved as a spectator. Immediately after the French collapse of 1940, I moved to North Africa with a childhood friend of mine. Near the city where we had established ourselves were the ruins of an ancient Roman town destroyed by the Vandals in the course of the Barbarian Invasions that brought about the collapse of the Empire. My friend, because he was a promising Latinist as well as an aspiring poet, insisted upon our visiting the ruins, and we eventually made it a custom to walk through them every night. We would circle the blanched walls to enter houses whose roofs had crumbled to dust generations ago, and 1500 years would vanish before us. Here in this hearth still blackened by a fire that had ceased to burn more than a millenium before, a woman had lowered an earthen pot on the blazing coals. Here, on this wall whose stucco covering had fallen off over the ages, a weary decurion had rested his rectangular shield, and a look at the woman who greeted him and aroused in him this passion which Catullus has rendered immortal: "vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus" (*Catulle,* Association Guillaume Budé 1949, Poem V, line 1). And here a child was born, had lived, and died.

My friend was a Jew, and he found in these ruins even greater solace than I did. "After all," he once remarked, "I think the Barbarians lost the war: as long as two stones of this town stand together, Rome still lives, and the Vandals are forgotten; and I *know* that we Jews have beaten the Germans: even if they exterminate everyone of us, the Bible will live long after the last Nazi is dead and forgotten." A few months later we landed in New York. My friend joined the paratroops and was killed in Normandy, mangled by machine gun bullets even before reaching the ground. But he was right: the Nazis have left no monument to be remembered by, and he has gone to join those other Jews who long ago wrote the immortal book. In a way, he did not die: he still lives for me every time I open the Bible, and he will live as long as people read the Bible and die when they will cease reading it. The Bible, however, will be read only as long as teachers of language and literature will consider it worth reading. The day they will abandon the Biblical tradition in order to devote themselves exclusively to the here-and-now, my friend will cease to live, and they will have accomplished what the Nazi machine guns could never hope to do.

The second story was written by Vercors and is entitled *Night and Fog.* It reads like a nightmarish illustration for Lewis Mumford's discouraging observation that with our rejection of what he calls "the traditions of Judea, Greece, and Rome," we have necessarily reached the point where "the rise of the machine and the fall of man are two parts of the same process: never before have machines been so perfect, and never before have men sunk so low" (*The Condition of Man,* New York 1944, p. 391-392). It argues that perhaps the most frightful and execrable aspect of Nazi persecutions was the usually successful effort at making human beings lose their sense of identity, and it tells of a political prisoner who managed to retain his identity through six months in Auschwitz. Since the account is of an actual event, I am letting the former prisoner speak for himself:

> I was beaten, bludgeoned, knocked down. With cudgels, iron rods. Twenty times they left me for dead . . . but never quite let me die; they always stopped in time! . . . One can hold out against blows, cudgels, spit . . . It's only a matter of finding refuge within yourself. Everyone has his method. One will recite Virgil to himself. Another prays. I . . . had composed a litany for myself; a euchology, an invocation to the men I admire. Brutus, Louis Blanc, Robespierre . . . the noble Bonchamps, the stubborn Lenin, Pascal, Socrates. Copernicus . . . I would think intently of Richelieu dying a slow, endless death and yet without a weakening carrying on his intense labor . . . of Guillaumet, lost in the icy desert of the Andes, frozen, broken, blinded, but in obedience to his family duty walking, walking in the storm and the snow, so that his body might be found . . . That domain, the frontiers of that domain, no one can encroach on. Oh, one can die that way, to be sure! Thank God, one can die that way. He who dies that way is still a man.

(Vercors, *Three Short Novels,* Boston 1947, pp. 133-134). Like the aviator Guillaumet whom he admired so much, Vercors' hero was in effect preserving his identity by acting in accordance with his family tradition — a tradition which had developed over the 2414 years between 470 B.C. and 1944 A.D. And let us face the facts: just as it is difficult to teach an old dog new tricks, so it is far more difficult to destroy a 2414-year-old identity than whatever consciousness of the self may be acquired by a man who has never crossed the boundaries of the here-and-now, even if he has learned to speak twenty languages with perfect fluency.

A Sense Of Identity Needs Tradition

If we put together the lessons of Milton, Goethe, Arnold, Mumford, and Vercors, we necessarily reach the conclusion that any part of the educational process which takes time without contributing to the survival of the tradition must necessarily plead guilty to the charge of breaking down the

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THE TREASON OF THE CLERKS: A PARABLE FOR 1970 (Cont.)

very fibers of human culture while helping deprive the individual human being of his sense of identity with a tradition without which he is condemned to the desperate lot of a nameless and faceless nonentity among the Lonely Crowd. I doubt that a profession which would commit itself to such a crime against man could hope for a more honorable niche in history than the Treason of the Clerks. Paradoxically, foreign languages today have both the choice and the power to act like the clerks or like the Royal College: they can teach us how to order a *Gauloise Bleue,* a *Wiener Schnitzel,* or a *Tortilla* with a perfect French or German or Spanish accent; or they can turn us into human beings by forcing us to ponder over Homer or Vergil and Dante or Cervantes or Molière or Goethe. But for my consciousness of the realities of academic politics, I should conclude with the only piece of culturally honest advice I can give: let us burn down the language laboratory, do away with the junior year abroad, and make a serious knowledge of a classical language prerequisite to all major programs in modern languages, and we shall have justified ourselves.

Five Recommendations

I am much too much of a politician, however, to conclude on a culturally honest note, so that I shall instead follow a course of which both Tacitus and Henry Fielding might approve, and suggest that one might occasionally serve God while paying tribute to Mammon, hence the following suggestions.

1) *Let the colleges and universities turn out high-school teachers who are culturally reputable enough to earn the respect of colleagues and students.* In other words, make certain that the teacher of French has read Vergil in Latin, has been seriously exposed to *Roland,* Montaigne, and Molière, and has studied Shakespeare before he begins teaching his first class; and that the teacher of Latin has not become so involved in the beauties of the so-called Greek accusative that has remained virginal of all modern languages and literatures. Better still, devise a credential program which will qualify the teacher to offer Latin, English, and a modern foreign language, thus not merely exposing him to a modicum of literacy but also enabling him to gain friends for foreign languages.

2) *Organize summer institutes designed to provide non-humanistically trained teachers with means to remedy the wrongs which their own teachers have done them*: I should suggest in particular institutes where teachers of English, Latin, and Modern Foreign Languages may get together and help each other toward humanistic literacy.

3) On the assumption that, even though foreign languages are losing out as a general college requirement, certain individual departments may wish to institute their own requirement, *let us reorganize first and second-year language instruction at college so that it may suit the vested interests of other departments in the humanities and social sciences while regaining some kind of self-respect.*

4) *At the high-school, make certain that the third and fourth years of any language offer at least a literary alternative where bright students may submit important works to close scrutiny.* In addition, let the teacher of Modern Foreign Languages work in co-operation and collaboration with the teacher of Latin and the teacher of English rather than in competition with them: although the teacher of English may not yet have noticed the writing on the wall, his subject matter is in exactly as great danger as Latin and Modern Foreign Languages, and the only real choice is between co-operation and elimination.

5) *Finally, at all levels, let us make sure that we throw as few obstacles in the way of literature as possible.* Literature is our subject matter, and language is merely the means whereby this subject matter is transmitted: when we make phonetics prerequisite to Ronsard, we fully deserve the contempt with which we are currently looked upon.

Experience, incidentally, shows that the foregoing suggestions work where they have been tried. for the students are usually less selfish than their teachers and are willing to work hard as long as we refrain from selling them a bill of goods. More important than saving our jobs, acting upon the suggestions which I have merely transmitted to you from Milton, Arnold, and others will give us the satisfaction of knowing that we have not only repudiated our share in the Treason of the Clerks but have in addition contributed to the humanization of our pupils — and that, in the long run, is what a teacher of language and literature should want to know on the day he dies.[1]

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[1] The texts quoted and cited in the course of this paper are intended to be illustrative but not exclusive, and omissions testify to my ignorance rather than to my lack of respect for certain areas of the literary tradition.